

SAFETY NET

On the horizontal mill in the back corner
we machined slots into the hinges
of escape hatches,
slots that would allow the escape hatches
to swing open
when Air Force crew members had to bail out
of crashing K-20 bombers.
With excruciating craftsmanship and care,
we used shimstock and C-clamps
and rubber mallets
to position the hatches,
taking days
to shave thousandths of inches
off of the sides of slots
with saw cutters,
closing micrometers and running indicators
all over the surfaces of the slots
to make sure that they were as near to perfect
as possible.

We all knew
that if there were one K-20 bomber part
that would truly be indispensable to the preservation of
American lives,
it would be the escape hatch.

THE LOSER

Nothing inspired him like a cutter holder
that wouldn't budge.
His toes would dig in
to the leather of his steel-toed boots
as his hand and forearm throbbed,
his fingers turning white
as they strangled the hammer handle;
he would strike again and again,
blinking
as if he were about to cry,
unable to stop hammering
long after there was any chance
of it doing any good;
hammering at the fact
that his hammering was useless,
at the fact that he was there
hammering himself
into exhaustion.